

#Nosomosdesertores: Activism and Narratives of the Cuban Diaspora on Twitter

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This article analyzes how Cuban migrants use social media to produce and share narratives that solicit and negotiate rights related to Cuban migration policies. In the context of a reordering of relations between the Cuban state and its diaspora, we focus on activism of the collective “No Somos Desertores” (We Are Not Deserters) on Twitter. This group strives to give visibility to and denounce the banishment of Cuban professionals who abandoned international collaboration missions coordinated by the Cuban government, and to influence migratory policies that restrict the right to mobility of these professionals. The results reveal three narrative dimensions of the collective’s activism for migratory rights: (1) national belonging and the right to mobility, (2) the family consequences of their banishment, and (3) proposals to address Cuban migratory issues.

Keywords: Cuban migrants, social media, activism, Twitter

The inauguration of the current President of the Republic of Cuba Miguel Díaz-Canel in 2018 marked the first expressions of governability on digital media involving political actors of the Cuban state (Khrustaleva, 2021). Since then, the presence of the president and other political figures in the digital media, mainly the Twitter platform, have intensified communication networks between the Cuban state and its citizens, generating new experiences of collective political participation and communicational dynamics that include the diaspora.

Interactions in digital spaces between Cuban emigrants and the main institutional agents of the island’s government occur in a discursive landscape that, although still under renovation, carries tensions from decades of politicization of emigration by the Cuban government and its political conflict with the United States. In an earlier article (Santos & Cogo, 2021), we reflected on how for the past 60 years, the Cuban state has produced cyclical narratives of exclusion and reconciliation with its diaspora.

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The access of Cuban government representatives to the digital sphere in 2018 generated unprecedented conversational dynamics between Cuban officials and the nation's diaspora, particularly on Twitter. This has revealed discourses like that of the Cuban chancellor presented in the image below, which exemplify how the official Cuban narrative has focused strongly on the integration of emigrants, who are referred to as "nationals." The choice of the hashtag #LaPatriaSomosTodos indicates the reconfiguration of what had long been a combative and exclusionary official discourse toward migrants.



Figure 1. Screen print from the Twitter profile of the Cuban Chancellor Bruno Rodríguez. Caption: From April 8 to April 10, 2020, in #Habana, we conducted the IV "The Nation and Emigration" conference. The strengthening of ties of #Cuba with its nationals abroad is an ongoing, irreversible, and permanent process (Rodríguez Parrilla, 2020).

The reordering of migratory policies shaping relations between the Cuban government and its diaspora has also mobilized various discursive interactions in digital media by Cuban emigrants (Santos & Cogo, 2021). These interactions not only point to a consensus in relation to the framings proposed by the Cuban government but also suggest negotiations and disputes over positions related to policies for integrating the emigrants. These disputes and negotiations encompass themes such as the question of forced exile of emigrated professionals, family reunification, and the extension or elimination of deadlines for emigrants to enter and leave Cuba to guarantee maintenance of their rights as citizens.

In light of the reorganization of relations between the Cuban state¹ and its diaspora, this article analyzes how the collective, "No Somos Desertores" (We Are Not Deserters)² uses Twitter to gain visibility and denounce the framing as deserters of those Cuban professionals who abandon international missions coordinated by the Cuban government. The collective also strives to influence migratory policies that restrict these professionals' right to mobility.

¹ The terms "state" and "government" are used interchangeably in this article to refer to the centralized institutional structure that guides and regulates executive, legislative, and judicial powers in Cuba.

² Available at: <https://twitter.com/desertornosoy>

The Cuban Diaspora and Digital Spaces: The Trajectory and Context of Political Disputes

The Cuban diaspora is now present in North America (84%), Europe (10%), and Latin America (5%). The United States has the most Cuban emigrants, which is largely because of U.S. government policies that favor this type of immigration (Grenier, 2015). Under the U.S. Cuban Adjustment Act, Cuban migrants to the United States have some advantages over other migrants, such as a concession of work permits and an opportunity to opt for permanent residence in the country after two years of presence (Grenier, 2015).

It is thus estimated that most recent migratory waves of Cubans are composed of economically and professionally active segments of the island population. These segments find in labor mobility an alternative to avoid the gap between their technical and intellectual skills and the work opportunities available in Cuba (Aja Díaz, Rodríguez Soriano, Orosa Busutil, & Albizu-Campos Espiñeira, 2017, p. 44). The production of ties between the Cuban state and the diaspora is linked to the social and political reorganization Cuba has experienced since the 1990s. The effort to establish these ties is also the result of reformist policies that give continuity to a movement to rectify errors of the past. It was taken up by a Cuban political leadership that began to be renovated in 2018. For the first time in 59 years, the presidency of Cuba is occupied by a political figure who is not directly associated to Fidel and Raúl Castro, the only two presidents of the country between 1959 and 2018. The Internet has become a key field in which these ties between the Cuban state and its diaspora are taking place. However, conversations between Cuban officials and migrants continue to be conflictive, since key aspects of the Cuban migratory dilemma continue to be unresolved, such as the laws governing mobility. In previous studies (Cogo & Santos, 2021; Santos & Cogo, 2021) we indicated that Twitter is becoming an important platform for collective action in Cuba, not only for those living on the island but also for the transnational community. The diaspora has used the platform as a tool for directly challenging authorities about migratory issues.

This phenomenon stems from the Cuban diaspora's tradition of using digital media platforms to promote public debate about issues related to the homeland and the condition of displacement in postrevolutionary Cuba. As previous research has documented (Venegas, 2010), the Cuban diaspora has used the Internet to strengthen the transnational community and stimulate governmental responses about Cuban migratory issues. Venegas (2010) indicated in her study that since the early 2000s, the Internet has become a key vehicle for Cuban expats to "organize communities around the territorial longings of exiles" (Venegas, 2010, p. 33). Since then, empirical evidence has pointed to a predisposition of Cubans abroad to not only cultivate interpersonal networks on the island (Alfonso & Sánchez, 2017; García-Moreno & Pujadas, 2012), but also to produce counternarratives that challenge the official Cuban discourse by making denouncements, engaging in political activism, and calling for a historical review (Venegas, 2010, p. 157), particularly of the situation about exile.

These practices were intensified by the progressive digitalization of Cuban society and the emergence and consolidation of a Cuban transnational blogosphere since 2005, leading to the insertion of the Cuban diaspora into the island's public life (Herrera, 2017; Rafuls, 2015), and to the individualization of Internet consumption, which reached a milestone in 2008 when Cubans were authorized for the first time to own private cellphone numbers (Celecia Pérez, 2020). The country has progressively shifted from collective Internet use (Uxó, 2009) to more personal access, particularly with the installation of 3G and 4G

technologies on the island in 2017 and 2019, respectively. Thus, digital connectivity has proved to be a key aspect of sociability for Cubans on the island, and for the articulation of transnational ties with the diaspora in interpersonal spheres and those concerning activists.

García-Moreno's (2011) study with 31 Cuban women migrants living in Spain highlighted the importance of communication technologies among migrants for supporting ties with family and friends in Cuba. The study shows that Cuban migrant women worked to purchase mobile devices (cell phones) for their closest contacts on the island, to allow more private transnational communication with family members and avoid the use of collective communication centers, in a context in which the digitalization of Cuban society was still quite precarious and access was essentially shaped by collective use of technology (García-Moreno, 2011, p. 358).

Beyond the interpersonal transnational dynamics that digitalization of Cuban society has promoted, members of the Cuban presidential cabinet began to use Twitter in 2018, which simultaneously encountered and encouraged Cuban transnational citizenship practices online (Khrustaleva, 2021) and was questioned by independent journalism vehicles (Celecia Pérez, 2020). The consolidation of these practices in Cuban virtual space has contributed to the diversification of public debate (Padilla, 2017) by incorporating the displaced community into the domestic agenda.

Migrant Activism and Communication Agency in Digital Spaces

Martín-Barbero (2006) calls attention to the processes of imposition, dependence, domination, and homogenization that mark the presence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in social life. He also highlights the social processes of appropriation, resistance, and resignification of the production processes, contents, and logics of technologies. The various and not always predictable uses of ICTs can engender other forms of knowledge, new perceptions, sensibilities, languages, sociabilities, and modes of intervention in the social reality, Martín-Barbero affirms.

The growth of migratory movements, according to various authors, is associated with the expansion of transportation and communication technologies that help improve and reduce travel costs and expand and facilitate access to information and the communication media. Portes (2004) recalls that, although there are examples of transnationalism throughout the history of migrations, "compared to the past, migrants today have many more technological resources for maintaining social, economic, political or cultural ties with their respective countries of origin" (p. 74).

More recently, the digitalization of communication and the popularization of the Internet have also influenced migrant networks and transnational dynamics constituted by multiple interconnections between migrants' countries of origin and destination (Alves & Silva, 2018; Georgiou, 2018; Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999; Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Vervotec, 2009). The transnational spaces developed by migrants are constituted by continuous and contradictory deterritorialization and reterritorialization dynamics that result from globalization processes and reconfigure the very notion of space and belonging (Mezzadra, 2005). These spatial dynamics have been observed in a study about the digital platform "Connecting Cubans" (<https://www.conectandocubanos.com/>), which is a collaborative project that serves

as “a network for transnational collaboration” created by Cuban residents in Brazil (Rodríguez Santos, 2021, p. 9). Through the platform, Cuban migrants can hire services to remit funds to Cuba, buy flight tickets, and receive help from a dedicated communal fund created to help migrants in vulnerable situations who are part of the network. The project is coordinated by Cuban residents in Brazil and has no official support from these migrants’ home or host countries.

Mezzadra (2005) situates these transnational dynamics in a migratory epistemology that aims to shift migrants from a passive position and recognize their ability to exercise agency and create spaces of action and autonomy, even if limited, related to the structures and norms that shape their migratory trajectories. In terms of migrants’ agency to exercise transnationalism through digital media, existing literature has documented approaches that highlight the uses of technologies in various aspects of migratory trajectories (Cogo, Elhajji, & Huertas, 2012; Tsagarousianou & Retis, 2019). These include planning and implementation of migration projects; dynamics of setting in, residency, and sociability in destination societies; processes of legal regularization; and the production of political actions to mobilize rights and citizenship.

Our analysis builds on prior studies that have examined the uses of social media to stimulate activism by Ibero-American and Caribbean diasporas. These studies reflect on the understanding of immigrants as political subjects by considering the influence of social media on the production of local, national, and transnational spaces of citizenship practices.

Three recent studies focusing on the Spanish diaspora and their digital activism examine the “Marea Granate” collective, a transnational and nonpartisan movement composed of young Spanish immigrants who created the collective after the 2008 economic crisis. These studies investigated how the migrant collective articulated activism practices to construct political spaces and claim the right to influence Spanish migration policies, which directly affect the diasporic community. Among these rights are those related to the improvement of precarious working conditions experienced by Spanish youth both in their home and host countries, access to health services in Spain, and removal of administrative barriers imposed by the Spanish government on their right to vote while living abroad (Cogo & Olivera, 2017; Martínez, 2017; Olivera & Cogo, 2017).

In a study with Bolivian activists in São Paulo, Brazil, Almeida (2021) revealed similar dynamics in their response to the 2019 coup against Bolivian president Evo Morales. Almeida (2021) shows that the Whipala press vehicle on the Telegram app was used by activists to call for demonstrations in the streets of São Paulo against the illegitimate government of Jeanine Áñez and used Telegram to demand new elections in Bolivia and their right to vote from abroad, which was threatened by the Áñez government.

These studies highlight the existence of a kind of diasporic activism that uses social media dynamics and structures to produce disputes for rights and citizenship that allow immigrants to participate in the social, political, and economic life in their countries of origin. As seen in the abovementioned studies, this participation appears to be directly linked to various issues that converge with rights within the nation, such as voting and defense of democracy. However, as Tarrow (2010) suggests, this participation does not exclude nationalist immigrants who have mobilized discourses developed by the diaspora to destabilize or

overthrow the government of the countries of origin, such as Croatians in Canada, Irish in Boston, and Kurds in Germany.

The research presented here was conducted in national contexts where processes of digitization of social life are more consolidated than what is observed in Cuba. Thus, the objective of the study is to contribute to reflections on the emergence of experiences of diasporic activism that result precisely from a very recent process of digitalization of communication and the popularization of the Internet in national spaces, as is the case of Cuba.

In the case of the collective "No Somos Desertores," analyzed in this article, we seek to understand the notion of agency based on the development of a migrant political activism that emerges from the specific process that shapes the constitution of Cuban health professionals as a diasporic group. This is a professional sector that, when summoned by the state to work on missions abroad, begins to experience a nonvoluntary and temporary migratory condition. Some medical professionals on these missions decide not to return to Cuba and stay abroad as migrants and are then considered defectors by the Cuban government. Their new condition as permanent and voluntary migrants has inspired activism toward the Cuban state by health professionals, who seek recognition of their diasporic condition and rights as nationals of their home country, in particular the right to return to and leave Cuba and maintain family ties.

Methodology

For the analysis proposed here, observations and mapping were conducted of individuals and collectives from the Cuban diaspora on Twitter so that we could become familiar with the discussions between a sector of the Cuban diaspora and Cuban government representatives that have become dynamic in this digital space. By frequently checking the activity of these profiles, which were intentionally chosen, as we will explain below, we observed discourses of Cuban emigrants who question how the Cuban state frames some groups of emigrants in its rhetoric and migration policy, while simultaneously seeking to articulate their ties and belonging to Cuba through their diasporic condition. The primary identification of these profiles was facilitated by the authors' proximity and familiarity with these collectives and individuals in the field, mainly through previous research (Cogo & Santos, 2021; Santos & Cogo, 2021).

These investigations revealed that this diaspora has an active presence on Twitter, where Cuban government representatives also display regular activity. This confluence supports more direct dynamics of interaction, conversation, confrontations, and disputes between the diaspora and the Cuban state. As other authors have indicated, Twitter is a vehicle for political communication worldwide (Campos Domínguez, 2017). In the Cuban context, since 2018, the platform functions as a device that is essential to Cuban officials' public accountability, after Cuban president Miguel Díaz-Canel summoned his cabinet to use the platform as a vehicle of governability (Khrustaleva, 2021, p. 88). Since then, the platform has proven to be a fertile place for domestic citizenship practices online (Boza Ibarra, 2019). Observations by the authors on Twitter (those made as users and those guided by research interests) showed that as the government debuted on the platform, unprecedented interactions between Cuban transnational collectives, government actors, and individual citizens began to take place (Cogo & Santos, 2021; Santos & Cogo, 2021). Twitter

has become the second most-used social media platform in Cuba (Global Stats, n.d.-a)³ as it is worldwide (Global Stats, n.d.-b), behind only Facebook, and since its interface and features facilitate research practices such as the monitoring of certain topics of conversation and interaction (Ahmed, Bath, & Demartini, 2017, p. 85), the platform is now the social media space most studied in the social sciences (Williams, Burnap, & Sloan, 2017, p. 1151).

Considering this context and our research interests, we have taken Twitter as our research field to analyze how Cuban migrant collectives use the platform in the context of the Cuban government's active online presence and how they take advantage of the opportunities provided by this presence, and the presence of other international actors, to produce narratives about Cuban migratory issues. In the mapping conducted, 10 profiles that engage in this form of activism on Twitter were identified, including six personal accounts and four collective profiles.⁴

After examining these profiles, we selected the collective "No Somos Desertores" for our analysis. Created in 2018, this profile focuses predominantly on producing narratives and mobilizing discursive disputes over the banishment of Cuban professionals, particularly healthcare professions who abandon labor missions abroad to emigrate to other countries. The period of analysis of the posts on the profile "No Somos Desertores"—from July 2020 to January 2021—was chosen because of the many interactions about issues that refer to the defense and mobilization of rights to belong to the nation for professionals who participated in work missions abroad. Because of the many comments to each post during that period, the analysis focused exclusively on the posts generated by the "No Somos Desertores" collective itself. Moreover, we noticed that many posts had not only a critical character but offered proposals for Cuban migratory policy concerning the rights of doctors on "missions" and their working conditions.

The posts collected on the Twitter profile were analyzed based on a conceptual perspective of narrative, considering these discursive constructions as a representation of events, to the degree that the social actors give meaning, organize, and establish relations among these events. Narrative practices are thus inserted in specific historical-social contexts, serve social and political functions, and cannot be abstracted from the conditions in which they are produced and received (Procópio, 2016). Fairclough (1992) defended narrative analysis as a strategy to reveal how certain "constructions of reality in language contribute to the production, reproduction, or transformation of existing social relations" (p. 87).

To conduct the analysis, we examined 389 posts from the "No Somos Desertores" Twitter profile. The posts were retrieved manually by the authors considering the time frame defined for the research: July 2020 to January 2021. The corpus of the study was collected by manually checking and analyzing each post shared by the collective during that period. We were already familiar with some of them because of our contact with the profiles in a previous study (Cogo & Santos, 2021; Santos & Cogo, 2021). Considering that the research began after the period defined for the analysis itself, we retrospectively reviewed the "No

³ Available at: <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/cuba>

⁴ They include: Cuban Doctors Human Rights (<https://twitter.com/cubandoctorsHR>), Casa Nación (<https://twitter.com/CASANacion>), Fica Doutor (<https://twitter.com/FicaDoutor>) and No Somos Desertores (<https://twitter.com/desertornosoy>).

Somos Desertores” profile on Twitter to collect each tweet shared since July 2020. We then defined categories based on the predominant topics raised in the narratives observed and decided to focus the analysis specifically on the issues of: (1) national belonging and the right to mobility, (2) consequences of banishment on family relations, and (3) proposals and interventions from the diaspora related to Cuban migratory issues. Before conducting an empiric analysis of these three dimensions, we will present a brief contextualization of Cuban international cooperation programs, which serve as spaces for development of the activism and narrative disputes of the collective “No Somos Desertores.”

Certain ethical procedures were adopted to protect the identities of the users engaged in interactions shaping the “No Somos Desertores” profile on Twitter. The user identification names were deleted from the figures and the transcription of the tweets to prevent them from being identified and faces in photos were blurred. It is important to note that the analysis was shaped by our analytical positions and specific perspectives as Cuban and Brazilian researchers focusing on migratory movements. This proximity created an epistemological challenge for us as researchers to keep a certain distance from the object, to help us fully understand the phenomenon, while preventing personal beliefs and inclinations from compromising the analysis. We were also challenged to overcome some of the binary framings and polarizations that have defined media and academic approaches to the Cuban migratory dilemma, particularly those concerning Cuban medical missions abroad. Such polarization relates not only to migration policies, but also to forms of defining the Cuban diaspora in certain official and public discourses of the Cuban government that promote the politicization and penalization of Cuban migration. These discourses have created an opposition between “nation” and “emigration,” as well as legal mechanisms to restrict diaspora inclusion in the internal affairs of the country (Santos & Cogo, 2021), especially for those diasporic groups that abandon missions abroad, such as health professionals.

Cuban Medical “Missions”: From Heroes in White Gowns to Deserters

In 2006, the earnings from the missions reached US\$ 2.312 billion, exceeding revenue from Cuba’s nickel and cobalt exports and from tourism (Feinsilver, 2010, p. 98). It is estimated that in 2008, the economic return to Cuba from export of medical services represented 50% of the country’s total exports of goods and services (Mesa-Lago, 2009).

For decades, Cuban professionals who abandoned work missions abroad have been subjected to banishment exiles (Chotil, 2016) that can last eight years, a period in which these professionals are prohibited from returning to their country of origin, even as visitors. Although this policy is relatively recent, it emerges from a historical context of hostility and conflict between Cuba and the United States that began in the 1960s, with Washington’s implementation of an embargo and related U.S. laws such as the Cuban Adjustment Act that spurred Cuba’s authoritarian migration policies. As we indicated in previous research (Santos & Cogo, 2021), Cuba’s official posture toward its diaspora since then has historically promoted a discourse that equates the figures of “migrant” and “dissident,” which have merged in the nation’s collective imaginary (De Aragón et al., 2011). This understanding influenced migratory legislation and led to laws that “punish” and politicize certain types of displacement, and under which “abandonment” of work missions abroad is framed. Cuban legislation subjects the “abandonment” of work missions abroad to sanctions, such as Law 62 of the Cuban Penal Code, Article No. 135, which punishes the “abandonment” of a work mission

abroad or the refusal to return after a mission is concluded by a public employee to "privation of freedom" from three to eight years (Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular de la República de Cuba, 1999). In this regard, banishment from the country of origin somehow becomes a derivation of this sanction.

Even though they are coordinated by the state, many Cuban healthcare professionals on these missions have undertaken permanent or temporary migratory projects that favor transnational experiences between their country of origin and that where they work. As in any migratory process originated in Cuba, the causes that lead to abandoning medical missions, as well as the rhetorical responses of the Cuban state to these flows, are inscribed in the context of the historic conflict with the United States. Over the years, U.S. governments have promoted policies of exclusive reception for Cuban citizens, seeking above all to capture qualified professionals. One of the main initiatives in this realm was the creation in 2006 of the U.S.'s Cuban Medical Professional Parole (CMPP) Program, to attract Cuban doctors. The program sought to offer migratory benefits to healthcare professionals who, through a third country that was not that of their origin, requested political asylum in the United States. While it was active (Primera, 2014), the program allowed international missions organized by the Cuban state to become sought by Cuban doctors as a vehicle for realizing definitive movements, stimulated by the preferential migratory treatment by the United States. The program was eliminated in 2017 as part of the measures taken by the administration of then U.S. president Barack Obama to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba.

The "deserters" from missions are thus excluded from the new rhetoric and from policies for integration of the Cuban diaspora to the nation more recently established by the Cuban government and encouraged in digital media such as Twitter. In recent years, these disputes have been gaining visibility on digital media. The narratives shared on the Twitter profile "No Somos Desertores" focus on requests by Cuban professionals for recognition of their condition as "migrants" and not as "deserters,"⁵ and defend their migratory rights based on the principle of the mobility of individuals as a universal right.

Neither Deserters Nor Traitors: Narratives About National Belonging and the Right to Mobility

The analysis of posts on the profile "No Somos Desertores" at first allows reflecting on the construction of the notion of the "Cuban emigrant" in opposition to the discursive repertoire traditionally used by Cuban laws and government discourse to describe these collectives. "No somos desertores, 'ni' cobardes 'ni' resentidos etc" (We are not deserters, or cowards or resentful) are statements that are used as hashtags and in posts on the profile and encompass the demands for recognition of the condition of emigrant and of belonging to the nation by those who have abandoned medical missions. They also reaffirm the legal difficulties imposed by the migratory policies to the integration to Cuba of those who consider themselves emigrants and not deserters, in contrast to the marginalized space that they occupy in hegemonic government narratives.

Although they do not use the term "emigrant," the name of the collective "No Somos Desertores" is a denial of a purported condition and a defense of a self-definition in terms of belonging and rights.

⁵ And that in some cases do not identify with a position that opposes the Cuban regime.

According to the creators of the page, they clarify in the "About Us" section on the collective's website that "the name of our website responds to our rejection to being called traitors of the nation simply for violating a labor contract" (No Somos Desertores, n.d.).

From this perspective, the central argument of the posts focuses on a defense of the end of migratory consequences in response to the abandonment of international missions. The abandonment of a mission, as suggested by the posts analyzed, is a break in the contract and in the labor relations of the migrants that should not affect their right to mobility and to return to Cuba. The consequences should be related to their labor contract and administrative, not to migratory issues. The following retweet is an example:

In addition to being a deserter I am considered to be a dissident so I will never be able to return although my mother, brother and nephews are in Cuba. They, the regime, decided that I could not return . . . I have not seen my family in 4 years. (No Somos Desertores, 2020i)

The other tweet, posted by one of the community members and shared in the collective's profile affirms that the right to mobility of the so-called deserters should be maintained, as seen in Figure 2:



Figure 2. Post collected on the Twitter profile of the collective "No Somos Desertores." Caption: Abandoning a work contract has contractual, administrative, and labor consequences, but never migratory ones. To bar us is a set back and harms the Cuban people. My proposal for this issue is: 1. Remove restrictions on entering and leaving (No Somos Desertores, 2020c).

Narratives presented on the profile also reveal the importance of the use of personal testimony to mobilize engagement around the fragility of the rights of the migrants who "abandon" the international cooperation missions coordinated by the Cuban state. With extremely personal places of speech, the statements of the Cuban professionals affected by the migratory measures that prohibit return question the systematic and prolonged character of the policies for control and restriction of mobility. A testimony shared by "No Somos Desertores" Twitter profile provides an example of these tensions: "They tell you that those

are the rules, and then threaten you with them. Read the complete text by following the link" (No Somos Desertores, 2021).

The strong presence of testimonies is related to the phenomenon known as "return of the subject" analyzed by Arfuch (2010) and they are considered essential in the reconfiguration of contemporary subjectivity both in the media, as is the case of the analysis proposed here, and in academic research and artistic experimentation. As self-narratives, testimonies constitute subjects to the degree that they articulate the dimensions of the individual and the collective, or even, of the individual, the social and historic (Arfuch, 2010; Delory-Momberger, 2015, p. 62). Moreover, as autobiographic narratives, testimonies gain importance not only as a form of personal expression, but as expressions of struggle in the public sphere for recognition and citizenship (Delory-Momberger, 2015), and they are also converted into a political act of resistance.

The testimonies shared on the profile "No Somos Desertores" emphasize that Cuban migrants who abandon work missions are not included in conciliatory movements by the Cuban state toward a portion of the diaspora, and thus occupy a frontier space. These declarations indicate a continuity of the prolonged character of "exile" that has historically defined postrevolutionary Cuba's diaspora experience, particularly that of those who migrate to the United States. The testimonies shared by "No Somos Desertores" converge with Colona and Grenier's (2012) reflections about the prolonged character of "exile."

In this sense, testimonies and personal stories confront the "adversary," the nation-state, in digital space to respond to and resolve the migratory dilemma of those who have been placed in a condition of exile. What was once a situation of mobility for those immigrants has become a long-term displacement with concrete impacts on their personal lives. In this context, their testimonies have become a discursive resource used to present their demands. Although those who abandon work contracts abroad expected this long-term displacement, as indicated by participants in the "No Somos Desertores" collective, the visibility facilitated by social media activism and collective articulation are resources the migrants use to produce international awareness and solicit an institutional response.

Furthermore, we understand that the migrant collective takes a position of resistance toward the character of exile imposed by the Cuban legislation on migration resulting from the abandonment of missions abroad by health professionals. Thus, the collective "No Somos Desertores" contributes to the densification of the Cuban transnational space in the digital sphere by mobilizing resources to generate public visibility of the restrictions to the right to mobility that depict the migrant collective as "defectors." In this perspective, Cuban health professionals also demand a dialogue with the Cuban state for changes in these restrictions or to exercise the migrants' agency to articulate spaces of professional performance abroad without state intervention.

Consequences of the Banishment on Family Relations

The testimonies also emphasize dimensions that compose the experience of Cuban exile and the prohibition to return to Cuba imposed on those who abandoned a "mission." The main appeal of the discourses observed focuses on showing the consequences of family separation; and the demand for the

right of these migrants to return and nourish family ties in their country of origin, through, for example, visits to the country. Among the posts shared, demonstrations and campaigns also appear, such as that called #QuitenLosOchoAños (End the Eight Years), which calls for ending the migratory norm that prohibits return to Cuba for periods of three to eight years for those professionals who abandon their missions.

For this reason, the images expressed by the narratives stand out and contribute to revealing with a testimonial, emotional, and autobiographic tone the concrete lives that have been affected by the Cuban policies that restrict mobility and family relations. These testimonies refer to the relevance of transnational family formations within Cuban migratory trajectories as processes of subjectivation related to the awareness of being and constituting family from afar. This experience is amplified by the development of communication technologies that allow migrants to reinforce family ties, practice mothering or fathering from a distance, and send remittances (Cogo, 2017; Herrera, 2013). In the case of Cuba, the experiences of transnational families have been strongly conditioned by political disputes between Cuba and the United States, which has historically imposed restrictions on the relationships between family members who migrated to or went into exile in the United States and those who remained on the island.

These political disputes and particularly migratory measures that facilitated the entry of Cuban nationals into the United States, such as health professionals, generated defensive migration policies designed by Cuba to contain the massive flight of these professionals. Among the measures applied is a ban on the reentry to Cuba of doctors who defect from their missions, for a period that ranges from three to eight years. One of the tweets collected in the profile "No Somos Desertores" refers to this historical separation of Cuban families triggered in 1959 by the Cuban Revolution and the beginning of the political disputes with the United States. The tweet, shared by the profile and originally published by a user who describes himself in his Twitter bio as banished from visiting Cuba, declares: "How can one speak of a people united if since 1959 they have separated Cuban families with their ideology and punished them for 8 years for breaking a slavocratic work contract" (No Somos Desertores, 2020d). In another tweet shared by "No Somos Desertore," the Cuban government is questioned in the testimony of a female health worker who has been prevented from returning to Cuba:

I have been [away] for 4 years and each day is worse, each day I cry more, I lost my grandmother and have not even been able to see her grave, for this reason every day of my life I ask for God's forgiveness, but I will die hating the dictatorship a thousand and one times. (No Somos Desertores, 2020f)

The interactions on the profile also reveal other aspects of control by the Cuban state related to the professional autonomy of those who migrate to participate in missions and that directly affect the economy of Cuban families, in view of remittances, constitute the second most-important source of foreign exchange in the country (Mesa-Lago & Svejnar, 2020). The narratives highlight the retention by the Cuban government of most of the salaries earned by the doctors, the precarious working conditions where the missions are realized, the freezing of bank accounts until they return to Cuba, the need to obtain authorization to visit Cuba in cases of illness or death of family members, the risk of suffering violence in war zones or those associated to the COVID-19 pandemic, and finally, the control of freedom of expression

when exercising the profession. A tweet by “No Somos Desertores” shares an account in which a male Cuban health professional living abroad denounces his difficult work conditions while on a mission in Venezuela:

Thank you @hypermediaed! In Venezuela I lived under conditions almost worse than in Cuba, in a quite difficult place. . . . The miserly pay was not enough for anything, approximately 10 dollars a month. At times I had to ask for money from Cuba. (No Somos Desertores, 2020h)

Another collected tweet shows the situation of vulnerability in which some Cuban health workers were submitted in Azerbaijan: “Intense fighting is being reported between the Azeri and Armenian army with intervention from artillery forces, tanks, planes, and other types of weapons, even so @MINSAPCuba sent 120 doctors and nurses to Azerbaijan. Who protects them?” (No Somos Desertores, 2020j).

The above posts also indicate that Cuban government actors were frequently challenged to question the precarious conditions and the risks that many of the healthcare professionals are submitted to during the missions. Nevertheless, observation of the interactions in the profile during the period of the study showed no governmental response or direct engagement with the posts. This is consistent with the common practice by Cuban officials who, when challenged or questioned on social media, ignore or even block users, as documented by the independent Cuban journalism vehicle “El Toque” (Boza Ibarra, 2019). Denunciations made by members of the diaspora have been no exception. Despite the efforts of collectives such as “No Somos Desertores” to challenge and question Cuban officials on Twitter about the community’s political agenda, representatives of the state have simply ignored the tagging strategies used by the collective, thus frustrating attempts to establish a conversation. In a previous study (Santos & Cogo, 2021), we found that any transition to a more conversational posture online by Cuban officials continues to be based on a very particular government vision of which sectors of the diaspora it is willing to reconcile with and which claims should be publicly considered and responded to.

From Mobilization to Denouncing Intervention with Proposals

The mobilizations stimulated by the Twitter profile also involve proposals to change the relations between Cuba and its diasporas, including those proposals that refer to the rights of those who migrate to participate in international collaboration missions. In this case, the notion of agency takes on a future dimension, in the perspective highlighted by Lacomba Vázquez and Moraes Mena (2020), building on narratives in which the collective #Nosomosdesertores imagines alternative possibilities for the diasporic condition of Cuban doctors. In this perspective, the collective calls for an opening of negotiation spaces with the Cuban government to seek changes in migration policies that directly affect the mobility of professionals working on missions. The collective also articulates alternatives that are no longer limited to the institutionalized political field represented by the Cuban state but suggest the creation of initiatives of self-management oriented toward the opening of direct channels for hiring Cuban health workers living abroad.

A first intervention shared on the profile analyzed, in the form of an online petition, indicates the effort by activists to engage with the Cuban government to seek changes in Cuban migration policies that affect the emigrants. Entitled “Ciudadanía plena para emigrados Cubanos” (Full citizenship for Cuban

emigrants), the petition includes 10 demands about Cuban emigration in general, without, however, failing to refer to the specific situation of the rights of Cuban doctors. The text of the petition indicates that

Among the requests of CASA and associated organizations, it is requested that doctor "desertores," punished for 8 years without the right to visit their families have the right to give a last goodbye to loved ones who are ill. Government lies from Havana boast of its "solidarity" with foreigners, the response to the Cuban people borders on Apartheid. (Embajada Ciudadana de la República de Cuba, 2020)

The petition, shared in a tweet that reads: "To those who are interested: 10 demands for Cuban emigration to @PresidenciaCuba" (No Somos Desertores, 2020g), with the profile of the Cuban government tagged, is not restricted to the situation of health workers and includes questions related to the Cuban diaspora in general. The petition calls for "the devolution of natural rights to return to the homeland" and "the establishment of an open access negotiating table between the [Cuban] government and the emigration[community], not conditioned by political affiliation." A vision of migrant agency is thus established in which the collective aims to create spaces of dialogue and negotiations with the Cuban government by emphasizing the diaspora's role as a key actor in the Cuban economy to demand changes in migratory policies.

A second intervention appears to promote a professional project that does not seek to change migration policies or to open room for negotiations with the Cuban government. Denominated "Free Cuban Doctors against COVID-19" and led by the organization @CubaArchive and the independent group "No Somos Desertores," the project seeks to directly connect Cuban doctors with international employment, without mediation from the Cuban state. This second modality points to the collective's effort to establish a space of agency that is not dedicated to migration policies but to opening a direct route of professional activity overseas without Cuban government intervention. It is a proposal that would reconfigure the historical role of international collaboration missions as the main source of income for the government and economy of the island, considering that, as mentioned, the missions represent 50% of the value of the country's foreign revenue.

Furthermore, considering migration, this positioning seems to point to a certain ambivalence in a dimension of migrant agency, which was also highlighted by Lacomba Vázquez and Moraes Mena (2020). That is, the acceptance by Cuban professionals of the state's role as the central administrator of their diasporic condition, which reinforces the official narrative of the Cuban state about health professionals as dissidents and therefore to intensifying the opposition between nation and emigration. The tweet collected in the profile analyzed, which is a retweet of one of the community members, states: "Cuban doctors can be contracted directly, without mediation of entities linked to the Havana government, as a result of a professional project announced Monday by the organization @ArchivoCuba and the independent group @desertornosoy @NobelPrize" (No Somos Desertores, 2020a).

In reference to the distribution by the Cuban government of the income obtained in the missions, the collective gave visibility to a tweet posted by a community member and activist, as shown in Figure 3:



Figure 3. Post collected on the Twitter profile of the "No Somos Desertores" collective. Caption: See thread. @DiazCanelB @MINSAPCuba @MMarreroCruz How is it possible that so little is invested in public health in #Cuba given that the largest remittances come precisely from the sale of medical services abroad? It is seen that the people are not a priority (No Somos Desertores, 2020b).

Final Considerations

The interactions observed on the Twitter profile of the collective "No Somos Desertores" indicate the formation of associations by migrants to address specific needs of those in the Cuban diaspora who have been banished from the country (Chotil, 2016). The agency of the migrants on digital media in this process of articulation has been important to the collective by allowing national and international interlocution with civil society actors concerning the banishment of members of the medical missions. The use of digital media also reveals the contradictions of the migratory policies and stimulates debates and disputes among those who find themselves excluded or discriminated by these policies and the actors in the Cuban government responsible for the formulation of the migratory laws and policies.

However, since no institutional response to the collective's claims was observed, and Cuban officials did not engage with the posts, it is difficult to affirm that "No Somos Desertores" activism is actually producing a significant shift in Cuba's migratory policies toward the abandonment of work missions abroad. Yet the group does raise international awareness of their dilemma since not only institutional actors from

the island are addressed in the posts, but also international groups and NGOs, some of which have publicly endorsed the collective's activism online, as the observation and mapping allowed us to perceive.

Therefore, considering the lack of an institutional response or public dialogue by Cuban officials and migratory authorities, we argue that the major shift in the collective's online activism relies on the discursive dimension, which claims the right of migrants not only to be considered part of the Cuban nation and not be framed as "deserters" but also their rights to return and to free circulation in the Cuban transnational space. In terms of their agency, migrant doctors engage in negotiations with the Cuban state about their condition and rights as a diasporic community, while also mobilizing strategies for working as doctors abroad with autonomy in relation to the Cuban state.

To continue the discussion of the role of social media in the Cuban migratory experience, this article sought to contribute to the current status of academic debate concerned with how the Cuban migratory dilemma unfolds on the Internet, particularly from the perspective of the Cuban diaspora's uses of social media to produce activism and engage with the country's migratory laws. The reflections proposed here also sought to emphasize the implications of the emergence of diasporic activist experiences in national contexts, such as Cuba, which are undergoing recent processes of digitization of social life.

Finally, the methodological limits of the study indicate that future research should conduct interviews with Cuban activists. This would allow us to highlight other aspects and even contradictions of their activist experiences that do not appear in the narratives of their Twitter profile.

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